

# **Animation and Peace Studies: An Encounter for Societal Betterment**

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Animation, as perhaps all modes of expression, has the potential to act as a tool for societal improvement. However, for animation to properly yield an informed and effective result for the benefit of society, it should arguably take advantage of research, that is, as in the cases described below, more often than not of an interdisciplinary nature. The key to going beyond a naive intention of changing the world and an actual positive contribution is a task-driven approach which prioritizes in-depth research, critical thinking and reflective practice and collaboration. This, for the difficult and prolonged intent of societal betterment, cannot be done when working among the narrow boundaries of one's own discipline and dealing more with technique and formality rather than the question at hand.

In this post I will engage with animation and the idea of societal betterment, which denotes a long-term process of an upgrade in the state of affairs between humans with the ultimate aim the state of 'Positive Peace', as described and popularized by Johan Galtung (1964: 2). Galtung wrote of Positive Peace as a state of human relations that can be summarized as justice, equality, prosperity, non-violence and solidarity (1964: 2; 2010: 354). The concept might be better understood in juxtaposition to the idea of 'Negative Peace', which is the condition of a relationship between two or more actors where violence in all of its forms is absent and the relationship between the conflicting parties is of an indifferent and indirect state (Galtung 1964: 2). To achieve Positive Peace, existing institutions must be revised to reflect values such as dialogue, cooperation and solidarity among people (Bilgin 2005: 44). For example, a society that has just agreed to end an armed conflict would be of a Negative Peace state. One that has established social systems that serve the

needs of everyone and has systems in place to constructively resolve conflict would, instead, be of a Positive Peace state (Dijkema 2007).

To further clarify and avoid misuse of the word peace, Galtung developed three principles (Galtung 1969: 167). The first one calls for the term to be used for social goals that are –at least orally– agreed to by many, if not by most. The second principle states that peace should be something tangible. Finally, Galtung declares that peace is the absence of any type of violence, even if this is of an invisible relationship quality (1969: 167). Based on the above conceptions, peace in Peace studies is not conceived only in its popular Western conceptualization as the end of armed conflict, but expands toward the establishment of a society with no visible, invisible, or structural violence, where society is consciously aiming toward the maximum physical and psychological well-being of its members and towards the maximum equality of opportunity and access to resources. Based on this conception of peace, work that might not be usually associated with peace-building, would be exactly that. In fact, it emerges that many examples which deal with animation in an interdisciplinary context, are also cases of peacebuilding.

The first work I examine is the work of the Leeds Animation Workshop, a non-profit, cooperative and women-led company, that has been running since 1976 to today (Leeds Animation Workshop n.d.). The group has originally gathered intending to create an animation about the need for childcare. Since then, it has created a plethora of animations aimed to inform and educate on different social issues of their community (see Ward 2006: 84; Wells 2002). Topics they engage with include racism and discrimination, child protection, bereavement, environmental issues, and gender and equal opportunities. Although they do not explicitly state that they are employing an interdisciplinary approach, the women involved explain that they carry out all the stages of production themselves, from ‘initial research to post-production’ and they combine their skills in art, education, administration, media and cultural work (Leeds Animation Workshop n.d.; Kuhn n.d.). Of particular relevance is *A World of Difference* (1997), financed by the European Commission. The short addresses racism and bullying and its plot deals with a young girl, Nataly, abducted by an alien who takes her to an imaginary planet. There she is appointed to solve the

problem of the failing purple students of the class, only to discover that it is discrimination against the purple students that makes them fail. A DVD of this animation and a resource workbook was produced to accompany classroom activity and discussion (Leedsanimation.org.uk n.d.). Children have the opportunity to watch this short and, with the help of a facilitator, a discussion on it can follow.

Please Insert video here: <https://vimeo.com/167863138> with the explanation:

*The Future* (2013), dir. Myria Christophini.

A second example is the work I undertook during my Doctoral studies at the Glasgow School of Art. The research was an inter-disciplinary, value-driven and practice-led inquiry that applied among others reflective animation practice to the case study of the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot relations (Christophini 2013). Keeping Galtung's guidelines of Positive Peace in mind, I applied an Action Research approach to find out the most prevalent themes in the relation of the two communities, as revealed by the community itself. Based on the results of the analysis of this exchange, I then decided to realize three animation prototypes<sup>1</sup> dealing with the lack of direct contact, misinformation and dehumanization of each other, the language barrier, and the visualization of a future Cyprus (see Christophini 2013; Christophini 2017a; Christophini 2017b, Christophini and Gonzalez 2018). These animations took the form of a simple bi-communal love story, a children's language lesson aiming to utilize animation's appeal to attract a young audience to learn the language of 'the enemy', as well as an animated documentary. The animated documentary in particular, called *The Future* (2013) explored the results of a future visualization exercise and was presented by characters drawn by the participants. These characters were speaking out the participants' words, voiced by me. Animation allowed participants to freely express their fears, hopes and other opinions on the contended subject of the realization of the 'High Level Agreements'<sup>2</sup> in relative honesty, while simultaneously remaining anonymous.

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<sup>1</sup> Test-animations, animations that were demonstrating the essence of the short without being distribution ready.

<sup>2</sup> In 1979 Kyprianou and Denktas reached the 'High Level Agreements' which called for a bi-communal demilitarised federation of Cyprus (United Nations 2008: 456).

The issue of mental illness is at the core of the last project I discuss. The Creative Communities programme applies a transdisciplinary approach involving different creative practices assisting communication of hidden mental health issues in rural areas in Scotland. The project is funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute, involves a collaboration of The Glasgow School of Art and The Edinburgh College of Art, and is led by Dr. Tara French and Prof. Chris Speed. Grounded in evidence-based research, the project utilizes an assets-based approach to address mental health, geographical inequities, and the application of digital creativity for well-being (French and Speed, 2020). Ultimately, it aims to use the outcome of creative expressions of lived experience along with written and visual material to influence the rural and mental health policy development in Scotland. Among others, the project involves the creation of animation. A team facilitated by Prof. Sarah Kettley and me, employed animation to provide people with an alternative creative option to have their voices heard. Our team collaboratively developed a short story we named *Creative Conversations Make Communities* (2019). Taking advantage of the different skills that can be utilized in the development of an animation piece, the participants were divided into different sub-groups and each dealt with the aspect of creation they felt more attracted to or comfortable with. Some created the characters, others the backgrounds and the props, and so on. In short, the premise of the story was revolving around the importance of community support to get through mental issues (see French and Speed, 2020). A narrative that communicated their unique situation and needs was put together, and all participants collaborated effectively and seemed to enjoy the creative experience.

Please Insert video <https://vimeo.com/382607415?activityReferer=1> here with the explanation:

*Compassionate Conversations Make Communities* (2019), dir. The Creative Communities programme.

These three case studies are all potent examples of how animation can transcend the boundaries of a single discipline. In particular, they demonstrate how animation can ‘enter into discussion’ with the field of Peace studies for the attainment of Positive

Peace. The first example shows how animation can take advantage of its appeal to share a message and tell a narrative that could potentially positively impact society. In the second example the contribution to an animation project acted as an incentive for collaboration of communities with difficulties in direct communication and demonstrated how animation can be integrated into the Action Research methodology. The last example makes apparent how the process of creating animation can act as an opportunity for different modes of collaboration and provides an alternative voice to people in isolation.

In cases that deal with real-life applications, more often than not, remaining within the narrow confinements of traditionally set disciplines can be restricting and debilitating. It might be difficult for individuals who got trained in animation via a subject-led curriculum to start leading their work with a question that could have its answers in several disciplines and via the collaboration of potentially multiple experts in many fields. Therefore the training of how to conduct such interdisciplinary research should, in my opinion, start early on in studies. In line with Paul Ward (see 2013), I will conclude this article in benefit of a more integrated curriculum for the teaching of animation in H.E. I believe it is important for a curriculum to not limit itself merely to the teaching of the skills and techniques necessary to the development of animation industry professionals, but to also take advantage of the immense and concentrated nature of knowledge circulating in universities and include at least some aspects of collaboration and exchange among different disciplines.

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**Bio:** Dr Myria Christophini is a Scottish and Cypriot animator, visual artist and researcher. Her research is a practice-led investigation into creative communication avenues among people in conflict and is aiming to be a platform giving people an alternative voice about in issues such as mental health, loneliness or anxiety. As an interdisciplinary artist that embraces many media, she considers artistic communication and her message as her ultimate goal and is flexible in its achievement. To view her artwork visit [myriachristophiniart.com](http://myriachristophiniart.com)